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ABSTRACT

Interdisciplinary approaches to instruction are generally dominated by linearity, with an emphasis on linear progressive time. A more productive approach is the development of spatial constructs that provide a more directly visual approach to thought and discussion. The study of languages and cultures will be more effective if students are given the means to visualize one or more spaces in time and to examine and discuss the diverse aspects of a language or culture that occur simultaneously. The impact on the participants in the learning process is increased, discussion can be more varied, and the instruction is not limited to specific starting and ending points. In developing interdisciplinary approaches to teaching languages, literature, and culture, the potential for visualization offered by interdisciplinarity should be tapped, or the limitations of linearity will only be compounded. (MSE)

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INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE
AND CULTURE: THE USE OF SPATIAL CONSTRUCTS

ABSTRACT

Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of language and culture must involve a change in the structure of discourse. An emphasis on linearity dominates disciplinary approaches. A more productive approach is the development of spatial constructs which provide a more directly visual approach to thought and discussion. The visual emphasis allows simultaneity to surface, which has more impact on participants in learning. This means that discussion can be more varied and diverse. One is not limited to specific starting and ending points, a benefit to foreign language and culture study.

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INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: THE USE OF SPATIAL CONSTRUCTS

The search for interdisciplinary approaches can remain confined within the nature of disciplines. This search generally leads to the inclusion of sources and materials from related disciplines, which means in the case of foreign languages and culture: art, history, philosophy, literature, and linguistics. The significant factor is that a set of principles common to the disciplines is retained so that the arena of discourse, which means the statements and commentaries and the sense of what is true and false, remain consistent. Foucault has stated that..."disciplines are defined by groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools: all these constitute a sort of anonymous system, freely available to whoever wishes, or whoever is able to make use of them, without there being any question of their meaning or their validity being derived from whoever happened to invent them" (Foucault, 1972, p. 222). Foucault goes on to add that the organization of disciplines, while providing a framework for discourse, also opposes commentary. He states that "what is supposed at the point of departure is not some meaning which must be rediscovered, nor an identity to be reiterated; it is that which is required for the construction of new statements" (Foucault, 1972, p. 223). The new statements are part and parcel of the established field and must then fit into it. It would seem to follow, therefore, that attempts to include materials from other fields do not provide a new and different arena of discourse, only more of the same. If the interest in interdisciplinary approaches means that we are seeking a more accessible road to language and culture, then the efforts must be judged

critically to avoid making disciplines even more disciplinary. In brief, I am assuming here that our purpose, as teachers of languages, literatures and cultures, is to develop more productive methods of introducing, discussing, and making comprehensible, both to students and to ourselves, the values deriving from the study of other languages, literatures, and cultures. I am assuming as well that the manner of commenting and discussing requires an arena of discussion that relates more suitably to the language and knowledge levels of our students, which means different and various levels. It is from this point of departure that I wish to discuss disciplines and the use of spatial constructs.

A major characteristic of the disciplines is the importance of the dimension of time. Linear progressive time allows discussion to begin and end, with the added sense that knowledge has been accumulated and that the distance to truth has been lessened. The historical and the chronological become reference points. Discussion of culture and literature assumes a linear posture: medieval through Renaissance through classical or neo-classical through Enlightenment through Romanticism to Modernism. John Bleibtreu in The Parable of the Beast argues that "By far the largest number of our technological achievements consist of devices which manipulate time in terms of something else--except of course for modern medicine which, by extending the life-span, quite simply and directly draws out biological time on its own terms. But our achievements in communication and transportation--jet planes, ballistic missiles, radio and telephone--compress space in terms of linear time, thus expanding the latter"(Bleibtreu, 1968, p. 31). Bleibtreu adds that humans think about time in linear competitive terms.

The limitation of linearity, as Arnheim has pointed out, is that literary images must be developed by accretion. There is no simultaneity. Intellectual thinking must dismantle simultaneity. All of the perceptual concepts become linear and move in the same direction (Arnheim, 1969, pp. 246-250).

The priority given to linear progressive time has imposed an arena of discussion which limits language and conceptual development. Two glaring obstacles are the increasing amount of material which programs attempt to cover and the difficulty of maintaining continuity in presentation, which means always tying what has been stated to what has gone before. The assumption has been continuity and not discontinuity, accumulation and not repetition. The assumption has been that each course taught has a designated starting and ending point. It assumes flow in one direction. In contrast to time, space suggest simultaneity. Bleibtreu argues that "Space is far more subjectively appreciated by organisms than is time which passes for all of us, great beasts and tiny animalcules alike, in roughly the same way, since the circuit of the earth, the alternation of light and dark, affects all living things on this planet, directly or indirectly. The drive of an animal to acquire time by flight is readily seen by the casual observer. The drive to acquire space is not quite so easily or readily seen" (Bleibtreu, p. 182).

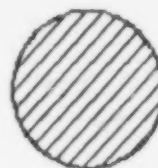
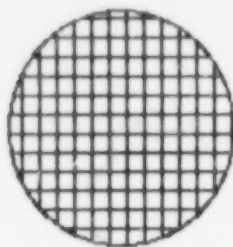
In establishing the distinctions between time and space, my purpose is to suggest, therefore, a useful interdisciplinary approach. Some practical applications may prove to be revealing. One of the best examples of the use of spatial constructs is the study by Vladimir Nabokov of the twin characters of Henry Jekyll/Edward Hyde. In his discussion of Stevenson's well-known characters, Nabokov has produced sketches to explain the

strange transformation in character. Nabokov posits three personalities: Jekyll, Hyde, and the Jekyll residue when Hyde takes over (Nabokov, 1980, p. 183):

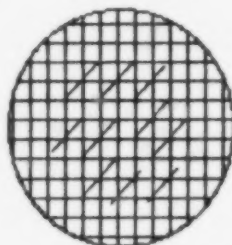
"The situation may be presented visually.

Henry Jekyll (large)

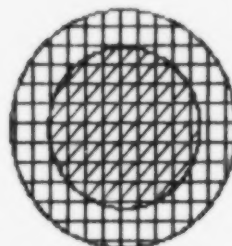
Edward Hyde (small)



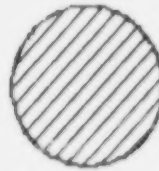
"But if you look closely you see that within this big, luminous, pleasantly tweedy Jekyll there are scattered rudiments of evil."



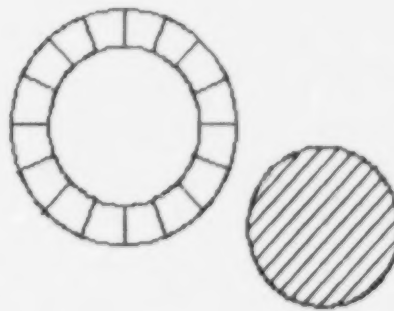
With the magic drug, "a dark concentration of this evil begins forming."



"and is projected or ejected as"



And Nabokov's final sketch reveals the relationship of the two characters.



The significance of Nabokov's sketches is that we need not find a starting point. Our interest is in the totality and the simultaneity. We can discuss process, but see, as well, all of the elements. He has provided us with a visual experience, a spatial approach to analysis (Nabokov, pp. 182-186). The value of Nabokov's visual rendition is that the two characters residing in the one person are viewed both together and separately. We are not concerned with verbal descriptions which, because they are necessarily linear, separate Hyde from Jekyll. Rudolf Arnheim believes the perceptual form to be "the strongest, most indispensable means of communication" (Rudolf Arnheim, 1982, p.x). Visual expression impacts more immediately and can elicit more varied responses. Nabokov's interest in visualization is even more evident in his discussion of Flaubert's Madame Bovary, especially when he refers to the importance of images which are developed by layers,

for example, the headgear, the wedding cake, or the coffin in which Emma lies (Nabokov, p. 128).

Michel Foucault provides a different approach to visualization, with the similar result of immediate impact, simultaneity, and spatial planes. Foucault suggests that the laws operating behind diverse statements can be uncovered by asking three questions: Who is speaking and with what qualifications? What is the space or site occupied by the person speaking? Finally, What filters are used by this person to receive information from others (Michel Foucault, 1972, pp. 32-33)? Note that the first question asks for documents. What is the status of the individual? What qualifies the person to speak? In the case of the second question, we need to determine what kind of space belongs to the individual: an office, a hospital, a street corner, a castle, etc. In the case of the last question, we are concerned with mental sets, instruments, special vocabulary, techniques of study, taxonomy of knowledge, and the like.

Let us consider an example: according to Foucault, a doctor of medicine possesses diplomas, belongs to associations, and is certified by tradition and the law. There is authority established, and it is even manifested in the stethoscope, the white working coat, and the general demeanor. The doctor of medicine occupies two principle spaces: the hospital and his private office. In terms of filters, the doctor of medicine possesses instruments and a language, replete with its own vocabulary. He has "langage" in the French sense of the word. Whatever a patient states will be transcribed into the doctor's language. By use of a spatial pattern involving authority, space or site, and an information filtering system, we can visualize the prestige and position of the doctor of medicine. Try to describe the same person in

linear terminology. The effect will be different. For example, note that a doctor who makes house calls loses the advantage of site or space. The doctor is no longer protected. He has left behind some of his filtering instruments and some of the obvious signs of his language and authority. A professor lecturing on the street corner, even with the same group of students, would find reception of the ideas drastically altered. The use of this type of process provides a more varied arena of discourse. One can discuss personages in novels in this way. The romantic hero in poetry and fiction, the principle personages in American novels as contrasted with those in French novels, the new intellectuals in governments and in bureaucracies, such as "le cadre," all can be explained through a visual process. Note, for example, that French personages in the novel occupy interior space, with all the variations which that allows. The American personages of the novel have less clearly defined spaces or sites. In fact they must create that space, perhaps in fashion similar to the settlers moving ever westward. It is interesting to note that the protagonists of American novels can be children, such as Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield, primarily because they are not confined to sites or spaces. The American cowboy also reflects the lack of a clearly defined site. In French novels the interior spaces are carefully detailed. One need only recall here Balzac and Flaubert.

By visualizing personages, discussions need not take only linear form, with its emphasis on history and subsequent movement. Linear analysis almost always requires that those discussing materials have read completely those materials. In literature and culture classes taught in a foreign language, this will seldom be the case. Discussion will have to

accommodate differing levels of reading and analysis. The use of a visual technique such as that explained by Foucault creates a different arena of discussion which provides direction to initiates in foreign literatures.

A specific example of visualization applied to culture study would be the development of spatial constructs to cover the usually delineated periods of French civilization. Instead of dates and verbal data, one can establish the cathedral, the kingdom, the court, the village or city, the nation, and modern institutions. These are all spaces or sites which have their own language, their own documents, their own filtering systems, their own persons of authority. The controls exercised through these sites provide a more coherent sense of culture and change than do dates and names. Clearly, the cathedral provided statements which were far more powerful and controlling than were the epics. By establishing the extent of spatial control, one more readily understands the impact of change when those older spaces gave way to new configurations.

In discussing Chinatowns in the United States as a closed space system, I am able to contrast the effects of a spatial system on a culture which is basically linear and temporal. Note that Chinatowns protect the culture and the language of the Chinese in America against the rapid assimilation process which the American culture imposes. Chinatown, studied as a spatial construct, explains the American culture by its very contrast to it. The policy of dispersing the Vietnamese in the first wave of new immigration reflected the desire of preventing closed space systems from developing even further. In other words, visual compositions, wherever they can be developed and discussed, prevent a narrowing of the framework to the point where those participating in the arena of discourse must limit

themselves to tightly controlled answers. Especially in an area such as language study, the attempt must be to expand the arena of discourse so that remarks can be made at different points and at varied levels.

In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Milan Kundera maps human life and composes it visually: "Human life--and herein lies its secret-- takes place in the immediate proximity of that border, even in direct contact with it; it is not miles away, but a fraction of an inch (Milan Kundera, 1980, pp. 206-207). The border of which he speaks is the border beyond which everything loses its meaning: love, convictions, faith, history. If one were to visually construct a map from these words, the visual impact itself would be frightening, although significant. In developing interdisciplinary approaches to languages, literatures and cultures, it is important that we emphasize the possible visual impact of this approach. Otherwise, we only compound the limitations of remaining within a discipline. Again, a visual construct from Kundera's work explains where care must be taken: "The invention of printing originally promoted mutual understanding. In the era of graphomania the writing of books has the opposite effect: everyone surrounds himself with his own writings as with a wall of mirrors cutting off all voices from without" (Milan Kundera, 1980, p.92).

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